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Military migrants and mercenary markets

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In September 2014 four civilians working for the UK-owned Group 4 Security (G4S) received the Queen's Gallantry Medal for their actions during an attack on the British Council compound in Kabul in 2011. The four men, all former soldiers who had served in the British Brigade of Gurkhas, were the first private security operatives to receive such an award, making this a significant step in the convergence of, and overlap between, the two sectors: private military and security companies (PMSCs) and the national armed forces. As veterans with over 50 collective years of army experience, they typify a well-established pattern whereby military-trained personnel transfer into the private sector. But there are other reasons why these hardened ex-soldiers provide a fitting introduction to this chapter on the dynamics of race and ethnicity in the private security sphere.

In this instance, the men were working for G4S Gurkha Security Services. Born in Nepal, their elite background as former Gurkhas had supplied them with a unique ethnic identification which they were able to exploit in order to sell their services as particular kinds of warriors. This marketable attribute derived from British imperial history simultaneously positioned them as distinctly 'foreign', regardless of whether they had been naturalised as UK citizens in the meantime. As both migrants and minorities, however, their status within the private security sphere would automatically entail a degree of vulnerability and 'outsiderness'. The combination of all these factors underline the urgency of understanding why migration has become such a central feature of private security work.

The Military Migrant

Military migrants are an integral feature of the contemporary military and security industry whether they are actively taking part in armed conflict or carrying out routine work involved in servicing military bases. A recent report by Al-Jazeera noted that the US military's Central Command currently employ nearly 40,000 foreign contract workers to do jobs such as cooking, housekeeping and driving in US bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. While these men and women are recruited to perform low paid menial labour, their role has become indispensable to the operation of US military power, almost anywhere in the world including Guantanamo. If we include this example of service work alongside the ex-Gurkha security personnel employed by G4S, we can immediately see how hard it is to offer a concise definition of the broad category of military migration. However, within the past decade, certain strands of military-related migration have begun to attract attention from scholars who have adopted distinct but overlapping perspectives towards the study of migrant labour within the private security sector. As a result, the deep-rooted racial, ethnic and cultural hierarchies within this "global market for force", (Chisholm in this Handbook), are gradually coming into view. We begin with an overview of this literature and its significance in understanding the wider phenomenon of military migration.

The most recent body of work considers the military migrant worker as a distinct category of person subject to governmental power without effective legal protection (Li 2015, Gammeltoft-Hansen in this Handbook). A focus on the legal aspects of military migration is essential in understanding the scale of what Li terms the "offshoring" of military power. It is widely known, he writes, that the US military has been radically

“transformed over the past fifteen years by widespread outsourcing to private contractors, whose numbers rival or even exceed those of uniformed personnel in war zones” (Li 2015: 127)

What is less well known, however, is that the most of the overseas contractor workforce are not American citizens, but men and women known as third country nationals (TCNs). Li explains why their predicament ought to attract greater attention from policy analysts and academic researchers:

“TCNs in particular work on U.S. bases under military authority while lacking most of the protections of American law, local regimes, or their home governments. They are often employed by non-U.S. companies subcontracted by American corporations, paid a fraction of what American contractors and soldiers make, and can be easily deported if deemed noncompliant. Many are forced to pay recruiting firms exorbitant fees to secure their jobs, leaving them highly indebted and effectively indentured” (Li 2015: 127).

While his analysis throws light on the hardships faced by military migrants within the US military complex, there are also broader questions to be asked about the rapid increase in privately contracted workers within a global context, whether they are trained to use lethal skills or part of the workforce maintaining military bases. Although they undoubtedly face the same problems as many other economic migrants, military migrants occupy a different status because, as Li reminds us, they are employed “on behalf of a foreign government in the exercise of a core sovereign function: namely, the use of force” (Li 2015: 127). As a result, they are frequently left in limbo in terms of employment rights, immigration regulations and access to any form of legal protection

The second area of analysis considers what Paul Higate describes as ‘the gendered and racialised contexts’ of an industry made up of an increasingly ‘diverse security contracting workforce’ (Higate 2012:37). Military migrants frequently endure the discriminatory terms and conditions that come with the status of being a TCN. Maya Eichler emphasizes the fact that, while there is scant data on the gender breakdown of the military migrant workforce, the vast majority of TCNs are men who come from the global South, from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, El Salvador, Chile, or Uganda (2013). However, she adds, “the category of TCN technically includes workers from Western countries other than the USA, such as the UK, Australia, or Canada and from countries in Eastern European and the former Soviet Union” (8). This is an important point because the privatization of military work draws largely on the experience and skills provided by thousands of former soldiers eager to transfer into a more risky but lucrative job market. Yet within this market, already stratified by nationality, ethnicity, geography and reputation based on fitness for martial labour, TCNs and local nationals (LNs) are motivated ‘to strike an ethnic bargain trading on assumptions around their embodied identities in return for material reward’ (Higate 2012). As we shall see below, the example of the former Gurkha soldiers, employed by G4S as an elite force, exemplifies this pattern.

A third dimension of the military migration phenomenon concerns the complex question of militarized citizenship and the extent to which this concept remains a key feature of postcolonial societies, especially where the legacies of imperialist history are still pending. Exploring the use of migrant labour in military and security work can help to illuminate the changing status of soldiering as an occupation that is intrinsically

connected to national citizenship. As the trend towards the privatization of security and military work continues, national military institutions become less accountable to public scrutiny, less representative of national populations and increasingly detached from conventional notions of patriotism and duty.

Drawing on the valuable scholarship carried out in the areas sketched out above, this chapter will suggest that the use of a racialized migrant labour force to supplement and supplant the work of state armed forces can illuminate “the politics of market fundamentalism, militarism and disposability” (Giroux 2014) that drive modern forms of warfare. In short, the field of military migration is distorted externally by range of factors: postcolonial dynamics; geopolitical arrangements; labour trafficking; immigration controls; and deep structures of global economic inequality. Internally, the study of military migrants must also reckon with the vulnerabilities and dangers inherent in war-related work; the discrepancies between the roles and rewards entailed in being soldiers, mercenaries or unskilled service workers; the racism of military personnel which is often intensified by overseas deployment; and the changing relationship between armed security work and access to citizenship and residency rights. All these factors contribute to the market in privatized military and security work, affecting both buyers and sellers of migrant labour in a world in which the lines between state armed forces and private security and military companies are increasingly blurred. In the next section, we address this convergence by examining the recent use of postcolonial migrant labour in the UK military.

Military migrants in the state sector

In his study of the topic, *Corporate Warriors* (2008), Peter Singer attributes the rapid growth of the global security industry to the break-up of the state monopoly of the military profession, a process that began to manifest itself in the 1990s. This point foregrounds the traffic of demobilized soldiers, fresh from deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan, into this emerging industry and provides one explanation for the blurring of lines between state and corporate interests. However, Eichler disagrees that the inexorable expansion of the private sector signals the weakening of the state's monopoly over legitimate force. Rather, she asserts, PMSCs have "joined Western states as key actors in global conflict"(2013:1). Focusing on the example of the US, she argues there are two reasons why the two sectors are locked in a more complex symbiosis:

"First... the neoliberal remaking of militarized citizenship through the termination of male conscription in 1973 was instrumental in paving the way for the increased privatization of military security, and second ... the outsourcing of military work to private companies allows for a global rescaling of recruitment that has geographically extended the spatial and social determinants of who works for or in support of the US military" (2013:1).

With regards to her first point, the abolition of conscription within the US and North American context can be usefully compared to the situation in European national states where the practice of compulsory national service for men has been pivotal in defining the relationship between citizenship, military service, and masculinity since the late 18th century. Norway and Austria are in a small minority of states that have opted to retain or even extend conscription as the majority of Europe has moved to the principle of all-volunteer professional armies, particularly post 1989. Despite these notable

exceptions, the end of national conscription signals a radical shift towards rebranding military service as a profession that stresses individual choice, lifestyle and career enhancement. Consequently recruiting officers have to compete within a crowded employment market and therefore find it increasingly hard to attract the requisite numbers and quality of applicants even after reducing the size of the regular standing armies.

Since the UK abolished national service in 1960, the armed forces have experienced many peaks and troughs in terms of voluntary enlistment. On several occasions during the late 20th century, the paucity (and quality) of volunteers provoked vigorous debates in parliament about how to supplement the ranks with migrant labour from former colonies. As the history of post-war Britain indicates, this unresolved imperial heritage means that successive governments have been able to draw on a vast reserve of labour to supplement the indigenous workforce, not just in the military but across the public sector. It is impossible to imagine the development of Britain's National Health Service, for example, without factoring in the historic contribution of migrant workers from the New Commonwealth and former colonies. But soldiers perform a different role from nurses, doctors and transport workers as their profession involves training in the use of lethal force. The deliberations about recruiting men (and occasionally women) from Commonwealth countries frequently alluded to the racial characteristics, reliability and martial qualities of the particular ethnicities concerned, always with an eye to the potential problems involved in compromising the national character of the armed forces.

A brief detour into the phenomenon of Britain's 21st century 'Foreign and Commonwealth' soldiers (FCs) can help to throw light on the complexity of militarized citizenship in the contemporary period. In February 1998 the UK Ministry of Defence turned again to this postcolonial workforce as a way of augmenting particular sections of the armed forces that were under-recruiting. The existing five-year residency period required for Commonwealth citizens was lifted in an attempt to meet this shortfall, leading to the recruitment of thousands of young men and women from over 30 different countries throughout the Commonwealth. Fifteen years later, however, the coalition reinstated the residency rule on the grounds that they could not justify recruiting migrants at a time when so many individuals were being made redundant. Thus this particular migratory path was closed to many young men and women who had previously been eligible for this category of work, a significant proportion of whom had been actively recruited by British Army teams operating in their countries of origin (Ware 2014).

Focusing on military migrants in the state armed forces might seem a diversion from analyzing the role of migrants in the private security sector, but the example provided by the UK illustrates an important point. It is more expedient for governments to work with private corporations – such as Capita and G4S¹ – than continue to justify the use of migrants from outside the EU. However, the effects of populist measures to regulate immigration have impacted on migrant soldiers and their families, bringing the Ministry of Defence into direct conflict with public opinion. In the next section we

¹ G4S Media Centre News, 'Armed Forces Reservists: G4S pledges to become leading provider of Armed Forces Reservists'. 23 July 2014
<http://www.g4s.com/en/Media%20Centre/News/2014/07/23/Armed%20Forces%20Reservists/>

explore the ambiguous status of military migrants as they move between the public and private sectors, highlighting the changing conditions of military labour in the 21st century.

The Ambiguous Status of Military Migrants

The connotations of being a ‘mercenary’ is relevant to this discussion of those who work in and across the private and state security spheres, not least because of its emotive force. Within the context of national military service in which employment is still rooted in notions of loyalty, citizenship and patriotism, the word ‘mercenary’ implies a lack of fidelity to such ideals and a readiness to perform dangerous and potentially lethal work solely for financial reward. A Fijian officer in the UK armed forces once mentioned to me that he had recently witnessed a heated discussion among his compatriots who were asking: ‘What are we doing in the British Army? Are we mercenaries?’ In a way this question can be interpreted as a rhetorical one, since they would have known that the constitution of the Commonwealth permits the UK government a special dispensation to recruit non-UK nationals. In addition, the oath of attestation requires individuals to pledge allegiance to the Queen who is nominally the monarch of 15 Commonwealth realms, including Fiji. In my research I heard soldiers from Fiji routinely talk about “coming up to the UK to serve Her Majesty”, implying that they were partly motivated by patriotism in their decision to leave their country.

However, the question about being mercenaries doubtless reflects the degree to which Fijian soldiers might feel outsiders within the context of UK society. Their experience of serving in a national army, not just as ethnic and cultural minorities but also as migrants who are subject to increasingly draconian immigration regulations, can

be used to expose the contradictions entailed in performing a role normally associated with what Catherine Lutz has called ‘supercitizenship’ within the corresponding US context (Lutz 2002, 794).

One of the outcomes of unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the UK, particularly the high rate of fatalities and serious injuries among soldiers, has been a renewed emphasis on the soldier who is viewed as both a victim of disastrous foreign policy and a figure deserving of public support (McCartney 2010; Ware 2014). In fact the word ‘soldier’ has become interchangeable with the word ‘hero’, a label that makes the reality of migrant status all the more galling for those servicemen and women who are not UK citizens. Not surprisingly this discrepancy has often been highlighted in campaigns to stop the deportation of individuals who have served in the UK forces, often for more than a decade, and who are subsequently denied residency rights on the basis of minor infractions. In one such case, a former soldier, Isimeli Baleiwai returned his medals in disgust at the treatment he had received. In a letter to the Prince of Wales published in the national media, he wrote: ‘My service to Queen and Country has been dishonoured and I have been betrayed’ (Vuibau 2013).

Although Baleiwai’s case received substantial publicity, there has been relatively little public discussion of the employment of migrants in the UK armed forces. Yet aside from the fact that their presence solved major recruiting shortages in the army, their status as minority ethnic personnel also contributed to the institution’s public image as a modern, multicultural employer. When recruiting began in 1998, for example, the proportion of black and minority ethnic soldiers in the army barely reached one per cent (Ware 2012: 34). According to the 2014 ‘diversity dashboard’, a set of figures published

annually by the Ministry of Defence, this figure has reached over 11 percent. What the statistics did not reveal, however, was that migrant soldiers (who now include former Gurkhas who have transferred into the regular armed forces), outnumber UK-born minority ethnic soldiers by two to one. Nevertheless the social and political significance of these figures testifies to the symbolic role of the national military institution as a public body that is representative of society as a whole, even (or especially) in its diversity. This has been particularly instrumental in discussions about the growing proportion of Muslims in the armed forces (Ware 2014). These examples indicate that there is a lingering value in retaining migrants in the state sector, given the significance of their minority status and the politics of race, especially in the context of deployments in Muslim-majority countries.

Restating the function of military institutions to fulfill their symbolic public responsibilities helps to illustrate some of the contingencies of martial labour and the restructuring of the global security industry that has taken place over the last two decades. Examples of individual vulnerability illustrates the precarious and risky nature of labour undertaken by military migrants, certainly in terms of legal status and immigration controls. They also reveal the tensions between the public perception of soldiering as a profession that is expected to confer the rights to residency, if not full citizenship, and the populist politics of immigration control. This point was driven home in the emotive campaign for the rights of ex-Gurkhas to reside in the UK which caught the national headlines in 2008-9.

‘Colonial constructs of difference’

In his book on military orientalism, Patrick Porter writes, “In and through war, people formulate what it means to be Western or non-Western...the very idea of the “West” replenishes itself through war”(2011:??). The representation of ‘Gurkhas’ as an exceptional group of soldiers reveals the durability of colonial constructs of ethnic difference derived from the history of racial subjugation. Although Nepalis are by no means the only ethnic group to have acquired an association with militaristic aptitude and expertise, their example underscores the value of a historical approach. For example, the concept of martial races is a crucial factor in understanding why Gurkhas were so valued within British military calculations (see Chisholm in this Handbook).

The Gurkha security guards who were awarded the medals for gallantry provide the perfect guide for understanding the way in which some categories of former servicemen are able to consolidate their ethnic identity as a positive asset as they transfer into a different job market that requires minimal training and preparation for jobs using lethal force. The brochure advertising G4S Gurkha Security Services explains that, ‘Our workforce consists of enhanced security officers from a variety of backgrounds and former British Army Gurkha officers.’ The organization is motivated by ‘The Gurkha ethos,’ which is described as follows:

“Gurkhas have served the British Crown for almost 200 years and fought and died alongside their British comrades in nearly every major war. Displaying loyalty, energy, discipline and honour, our ex-military management team all maintain their Gurkha ethos, and this is instilled within their teams. These attributes result in very low turnover of staff and exceptional levels of professionalism, calmness and clarity – even in volatile and traumatic situations.”

The fluency of this advertising copy compresses an extraordinary amount of history, particularly in the first sentence. It is inevitably simplistic as well as inaccurate as it gives the impression of consistent, unquestioning loyalty to the British Crown. It also muddies the distinction between the word 'Gurkha' as a coded ethnic and gendered identification and a term that simply refers to their professional affiliation.

The notion of a 'Gurkha ethos', described in the publicity for G4S Gurkha Security Services, has been undeniably strengthened by a highly effective media discourse that stressed these qualities while also cementing the notion that military service demands particular rewards. Different representations of Gurkha heritage serve particular purposes both in Nepal and Britain, where their status as military migrants drives continuing campaigns for pensions, parity with UK troops and the right to reside in the UK with access to health services and social welfare benefits. Writing about 'Nepalese Gurkhas and their battle for equal rights', Ché Singh Kochar-George has argued that 'colonial stereotyping along racial lines' not only occupies a powerful place in the public imagination but also means that 'colonial constructs of difference' continue to influence decisions made by the courts and government (2010: 44). Within this tradition, the frequent repetition of words such as 'discipline', 'loyalty', and 'honour' has also been instrumental in allowing former Gurkhas to position themselves – and to be branded – as ideal 'niche' employees within the PMSC sector as well.

However, here it is important to note that, following the tripartite agreement with Nepal in 1947, the Gurkha 'brand' is not confined to those who worked within the UK armed forces, even though their numbers have been drastically reduced (Ware 2011). Chisholm's valuable ethnographic work underlines the 'overall sense of exceptionalism

as well as hierarchy of subclassifications' of 'Gurkha' as a label (34). She discovered that most of the men she interviewed first aspired to join the British Army, then the Gurkha Contingent of the Singapore Police Force; only upon failing that would they become an Indian Gurkha. However, despite this hierarchy, she found that all of the Gurkhas she interviewed 'claimed to share common traits and could easily be identified from their Nepalese civilian or police counterparts who did not share their same discipline and loyalty' (34). This point is worth emphasizing since Nepali nationals comprise a significant proportion of military migrants performing unskilled labour on US military bases.

The global PMSC labour market is undoubtedly a zone that is stratified by economic and political interests mirroring those of the national states, organizations and companies competing for contracts. Nationality is a surprisingly important factor as many prefer to buy security services from their co-nationals, "often promoting this fact in their self definitions and in the marketing of their services" (Leander 2009, 14). In the same way that armed forces routinely prefer to work with "contractors who are either of their own nationality or at least who share a common military culture and background, private companies and individuals also find it easier to have security provided by people who share their security culture" (Leander 2009:14). This fact, compounded by the reputations and aspirations of particular ethnicized and racialized groups, provides another determining element in the dynamics of military migration.

Migration journeys

Writing from a different geopolitical perspective, Brigden and Vogt make useful

connections between the life choices of Salvadorean migrating to the US and young US citizens who enlist voluntarily in the military, two groups that embody a “neoliberal subjectivity produced through processes of violence, capital accumulation and militarization” (2014: 2). Arguing that the decision to join the armed forces and the decision to leave one’s home may both be conceptualized “within larger systems of social and economic uncertainty” (2014: 3) they suggest that:

As archetypes in their respective societies, both migrants and soldiers embody ideals of agency: resourceful men facing violence with bravery, discipline and a sense of duty. Migration journeys and wars can both be conceptualized as rites of passage and spaces of liminality marked by strong sense of *communitas*, courage and sacrifice. Migrants and soldiers search for respect, guided by notions of upward mobility, service and community, albeit in very different ways (2014:6).

Brigden and Vogt’s anthropological research provides fresh insights into these two areas – migration and military recruitment – indicating the value of a multi-disciplinary perspective. But what of the young men and women who are prepared to traverse the globe in pursuit of military work, also guided by “notions of upward mobility, service and community”? The example of military-related migration from Fiji provides a valuable case study here. In her discussion of militarism in the Pacific region, Teresia Teaiwa describes how ‘the cultures of militarism that pervade contemporary Fiji life are rapidly changing in the increasing globalization of labour and rapacious consumerization of society’ (2005: 204). Her gendered analysis illustrates the complex way in which military values and ideals both influence and reflect social, political and cultural divisions in ‘the most militarized independent nation in the Pacific’ (202).

Each year, hundreds of young people, mainly men, leave Fiji to work in PMSCs, contributing to national economies that have come to rely on their remittances.² In 2007 the UN Human Rights Council commissioned a survey following concerns that there were large numbers of Fijian men working as private contractors in Iraq. Their report began by acknowledging that “Fiji has an established tradition of well-trained, disciplined and highly skilled military and security personnel, who perform security functions in various capacities worldwide” (UNHRC 2008). Recognising the different factors propelling young people to seek work in PMSCs, it warned that “unemployment and/or underemployment, a migratory population ready to perform security work abroad, and largely unmonitored activities of private security companies in Fiji have facilitated such recruitment in Fiji for work, including in Iraq” (2008). However, the report warned that “in a number of instances, the security-related functions carried out by Fijians abroad through private military and security companies (PMSCs) may qualify as mercenary-related activities” (2008).

Conclusion

These juridical issues affecting the employment and immigration status of military migrants clearly need to be understood within national as well as wider comparative contexts. I have expanded the category here to encompass all those who drawn to work in military and security professions, regardless of whether they are classified as mercenaries, private contractors or conventional soldiers. The value of including non-

² In 2006 more than 1000 Fijians were working for private corporations in Iraq and Kuwait in security, transport and training (MacLellan 2006). The following year, a journalist from Bloomberg news agency witnessed what he called a ‘mercenary harvest’ in the country (Copetas 2007)

nationals who work in state armed forces in this discussion is that it highlights the common dilemmas faced by governments responding to escalating costs of maintaining standing armies, falling recruitment numbers and the mounting legal, ethical and political implications of placing soldiers in situations of risk. While in many settings military service once provided a link between democratic citizenship and social welfare, the turn towards recruiting migrants, even those with strong postcolonial connections to ‘the mother country’, signals an underlying crisis in the relationship between citizen and state. The UK example indicates that collaboration with the private security sector is replacing the use of migrant labour as a more politically (and financially) acceptable solution to shortfalls in voluntary recruitment. This has significant implications for changing ideals of militarized citizenship.

Focusing on the figure of the military migrant draws attention to the wholesale marketization of military and security work as well as the internal hierarchies and patterns of marginalization within this market. Meanwhile the discordant representation of soldiers as selfless heroes, ready to die for their countries, and of mercenaries as self-seeking professional warriors, who sell their skills for financial gain, appears ever more stark and unconvincing.

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